Learning to Market New York's Summer Tree Fruits

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by Linda McCandless

GENEVA, NY: Diversifying apple orchards in the Northeast by increasing plantings of summer fruits like peaches, plums, cherries, and nectarines was the focus of attention at the Second New York Stone Fruit School, held March 13-14, in Geneva, NY.

Suggested caption: Dr. Bob Andersen speaks at the Second New York Stone Fruit School.

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With the apple business doing so poorly and the outlook not too bright, apple growers are taking a new look at stone fruit," said Jim Bittner, who farms 500 acres of fruit along Lake Ontario. "On most of these apple farms, stone fruits were a bigger part of the operation 50 years ago than they are today."

No new apple plantings are planned in the near future at Singer Farms where Bittner is a partner. Current apple acreage is 200 acres. "It has gotten to the point where anyone can grow apples and prices show it," said Bittner. "We need to grow things that others can't or won't. Stone fruit fits there."

Bittner is planting many new summer fruit varieties in test blocks on the farm, hoping to capitalize on his proximity to urban markets, and convince consumers that summer fruit from local growers is riper when picked and tastes better than fruit shipped in from far away. "It takes work," said Bittner. "Our problem is that NY consumers don't know that we exist."

First among the many questions to be asked about growing stone fruit concerns marketing strategy. "When did you last attend a two-day meeting that had a full day devoted to marketing?" asked Steve Clarke, Milton, NY, grower.

Clarke, Bittner and the 80 other industry people, researchers and Cornell Cooperative Extension educators who attended the school, talked first about marketing, followed by

cultural topics: site selection, new varieties, pest control, and high-density orchard training systems.

"The tone of the meeting was very up-beat," said co-organizer Robert Andersen, Cornell University professor of horticultural sciences who directs the stone fruit breeding program at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva. "In two days, we had over 22 presentations-an expanded format from the first meeting two years ago. Growers had the opportunity to make business contacts with marketers and many creative ideas were exchanged."

Determine Your Markets Before You Plant

Wen-Fei Uva, senior extension associate in horticultural product marketing in Cornell's department of Agricultural Resource and Managerial Economics on the Ithaca campus, organized the marketing program. It featured growers, brokers, processors in Ontario and New York, and Cornell specialists. In her talk, Uva outlined stone fruit facts and industry trends in New York as well as per capita consumption trends for stone fruit crops in the USA.

Michael Roznye from Red Tomato addressed grower optimism about market proximity in the Northeast, and described what his company does to link farmers to wholesalers. Riper, better tasting fruit from NY orchards should gain marketshare in Eastern chain stores, especially if growers combine quality assurance standards with new varieties having unique flavors and improved consumer popularity.

The other buzz is "region, region, region." The new Northeast Stone Fruit Sponsors industry association expects to take a pro-active role in engendering regional cooperation rather than local competition among neighbors.

Planting for Yield and Quality

In the horticultural sessions organized by Andersen on Tuesday, Stephen A. Hoying, CCE leader of the Lake Ontario Fruit Team, talked about getting orchards off to a good start. "Summer fruit trees are not as tough as apple trees. For successful stone fruit plantings, growers should plan several years in advance," he said. Summer fruit growers must know the climatic characteristics of their sites and pay special attention to susceptibility to spring frost and minimum winter temperatures. They must also investigate their soils thoroughly because wet soils have low oxygen levels. Modifications are necessary in most NY soils through tile draining and/or ridging and by choosing the appropriate rootstock for the site.

The role of IPM was well covered by Peter Shearer from Rutgers University, one of four new faculty members hired to work on strengthening stone fruit production in southern Jersey. He showed that ground cover management is the key to controlling insects like thrips and tarnished plant bugs that cause bad surface blemishes. In the case of damage caused by the larval stage of the Oriental fruit moth, Shearer presented considerable data about achieving biological control with sex pheromones. Rotating controls and using them at the lowest possible rates can inhibit pest tolerance to chemical controls.

Plum Pox Virus (PPV) was another hot topic. This new scare has surfaced for the first time in New York. Virus survey activities by the NY State Plum Pox Taskforce were outlined by David Rosenberger, superintendent of the Hudson Valley Lab in Highland, NY. This taskforce includes the NYS Dept. of Ag. and Markets (NYSDAM), Cornell faculty, CCE educators, growers and USDA regulators.

Deputy Commissioner Rick Zimmerman represented NYSDAM at the school. Recently, all NY tree fruit growers received PPV information from NYSDAM Commissioner Rudgers that describes the disease and the NY survey activities for controlling it.

Rosenberger also reviewed control recommendations for common diseases of stone fruits. "Some diseases can be avoided by selection of resistant cultivars and by isolating new plantings from sources of disease inoculum," he said.

High-density orchard systems are of particular interest to growers whose key objective is earlier cropping and higher early yields. Terence Robinson, Cornell professor of horticultural sciences who specializes in training systems for fruit trees at the Experiment Station in Geneva, addressed whether or not orchard systems are adaptable to particular crops and, if so, the labor efficiencies and pest control that can be gained. Robinson and colleagues are trying out six new sweet cherry experiments at Geneva designed to keep trees small and get them to bear earlier. Rain-induced fruit cracking and bird damage could be drastically reduced by covering small trees with frames, nets and retractable plastic covers.

In talking about stone fruit diversification, Andersen said there is a keen interest in high-density cherries among NY fruit growers because-like prune plums-fresh sweet cherries are particularly healthful. He described "nutriceutical" as a term that will dictate marketing the medical benefits of plants, especially fruits and vegetables.

Peaches suffer from declining per capita consumption because they arrive on NY tables from distant states too green to ripen with really good taste. "Locally grown fresh peaches can be picked riper and will achieve full taste," said Andersen.

Processed peaches have also declined in consumption, but NY-grown processing peaches are gaining attention from Canadian and NY-based processors because of new varieties being bred for Eastern North American climates. High-density peach orchards can produce fruit earlier and with higher yields. Locally processed means reduced transportation costs-an important factor to consider when raw fruit represents only 20% of the final cost.

More Research Is Needed

Bittner, chairman of the Northeast Stone Fruit Sponsors, spoke for many of those present, noting much work needs to be done to support stone fruit research. "The Northeast Stone Fruit Sponsors must find a way to fund the research that needs to be done to make the growing of stone fruits in the Northeast a profitable option for growers. Some options include membership dues, grants, an industry checkoff, and the licensing of plant patents and trademarks that returns funds to research programs. Once funds are collected, a program similar to the Apple Research and Development Board would be set up to select and fund

grower-identified research projects."

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